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ABSTRACT

Graduate students (N=13) in a counselor education program in New York State participated in a study about what they thought were the main concerns of eighth grade students. A needs assessment is often a helpful method for counselors to plan and deliver services. The responses of the school counselor trainees were very different from the responses of eighth graders surveyed by other authors in North Carolina and from the responses of eighth graders in New York interviewed for this study. Counselor trainees thought eighth graders were concerned with superficial things such as clothes, attractiveness, and relationships. In reality, the eighth graders said they were concerned about academic success, family health, and death. The study confirms that school counselors should not develop programs based only on what they think is important to students. Utilizing a needs assessment is a more accurate tool for planning programs, and offering material on needs assessment would be benefit in any research course offered to graduate students. (JDM)

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Serendipity, Eighth Grade Concerns, and Needs Assessment

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In a recent telephone poll by the New York Times and CBS News over one thousand teenagers across the United States were interviewed. Seventy-eight percent of those interviewed said "getting good grades was important" (Goldberg & Connelly, 1999, p. A1). This type of information can help school counselors in developing programs for their students. In fact, school counselor education programs are designed to help counselors meet the academic, career, personal and social needs of the students. Collins and Angen explain that "many adolescents face emotional, social and physical problems which adversely affect school performance and put them at risk of dropping out of school or becoming involved in other self-defeating, self-destructive behaviors." (1997, p. 53) School counselors must be aware of these problems and develop programs to meet the developmental concerns of their students (Baker, 2000, p. 152). One method of discovering these concerns is the use of programmatic needs assessment. Hadley and Mitchell define needs assessment as an "evaluation that seeks data to answer questions about needs so that effective program planning can proceed." (1995, p. 457)

Lee and Workman surveyed school counselors on their use of research in the public schools as part of a larger needs assessment. "Only 25% indicated that their school division requires them to become involved in research activities, with needs assessment and program evaluations being the most frequently indicated required

activities." (1992, p. 17) Thus, needs assessment is a sometimes required method to help counselors plan and deliver services. It appears that offering material on needs assessment would be of benefit in any research course offered to prospective school counselors.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary (1994, p. 747) serendipity is "The faculty of making fortunate discoveries by accident." That means that serendipity occurs when you find something that you were not looking for. Serendipity describes the results of having shared a needs assessment research article with a graduate class in statistics and research taught by the third author. The purposes of sharing Carr and Schmidt's (1994) research on eighth grade student's concerns were to demonstrate how good research could have important findings with nothing more than the reporting of means and standard deviations and to show students a sample needs assessment technique. Carr and Schmidt developed and administered a forty item needs assessment questionnaire on student concerns with the results published in The School Counselor. (1994) They distributed the survey to one thousand three hundred thirty eighth –grade students, six hundred fifty four boys and six hundred seventy six girls, all in North Carolina schools. The questionnaire asked the students to indicate their level of concern by asking "How often do you worry about the following items?" The survey used a Likert type scale with a score of five indicating "I worry about this all the time," to a score of one indicating "I never worry about this."

The purpose of the Carr and Schmidt survey (1994) was to help an elementary counselor, who was moving to a middle school assignment, understand the concerns of middle school students. Their findings were fascinating to both professor and class but in different ways. Reporting mean scores for the study, they found that the top five concerns included: getting good grades; parent's health, a friend, relative, or family members dying; taking tests; and getting into college. (1994, p. 69)

When the survey information was presented to the research class, the students had a reaction that surprised the professor. They felt that, in spite of precautions taken in the research, the results were incorrect. They voiced a common belief that "Eighth graders are not concerned about those things." This proved to have a serendipitous result. One of the students decided that for her project in class, she would replicate the North Carolina study in a New York school. With permission from the study authors, she arranged for the survey to be administered in a local middle school to all of the eighth graders present on a specific date. Overall, her results were slightly lower in means than the previous research; however, the same five items were the top five in the New York replication (Basile, 1998). When she presented her results at the New York State School Counseling Associations annual convention, she received the same reaction that her classmates had had. Attendees voiced a common concern that "Eighth graders are not concerned about those things." Still, fascinated by the rejection of the findings of this study by so many counselor education trainees and counselors, the

professor encouraged another student to survey counseling education students about their beliefs about eighth grade concerns.

Method

The survey developed by Carr and Schmidt (1994) was used with their permission. A total of thirteen counselor education graduate students (counselor trainees) who were currently taking a course in statistics and research methods at a public college in upstate/central New York completed the survey. The counselor education students were instructed to fill out the survey based on what they believe is of concern to eighth grade students.

Results

Overall, the data indicated that the responses of school counselor trainees were very different from the responses of eighth graders surveyed in New York and North Carolina. The counselor education students ranked not being attractive to others, people talking/gossiping about you, not having nice clothes, being teased or laughed at by classmates, and not having any friends as the top five concerns (Pros, 1999). Perhaps the largest difference in ranking occurred with the question related to the concern about "Dying." The counselor education students ranked "Dying" at number forty, last on the survey, while eighth grade students surveyed in North Carolina and New York both ranked "Dying" as the number eight concern. (Pros, 1999) Further results can be

compared in Table A. A copy of the survey is available in the Carr and Schmidt (1994) article.

The results of the survey with the counselor education students revealed that they could not accurately identify the concerns of eighth grade students. The responses the counselor education students ranked the highest were concerns about superficial things, such as clothes, attractiveness, relationships, etc. The five concerns that received the highest ranking by the counselor education students all focused on issues relating to self-esteem and interpersonal relationships. In comparison, the eighth graders who took the survey indicated concerns about academic success, family health, and death. (Carr and Schmidt, 1994; Basile, 1998; Pros, 1999)

Implications for School Counselors

The results from these surveys highlight the importance of using a needs assessment instrument to determine what areas to address when developing counseling programs and activities. The results indicate how difficult it is to try to understand what issues are of concern to students without actually asking them. This study confirms that school counselors should not develop programs based only on what they think or were trained to believe is important. Utilizing a needs assessment is a more accurate tool when counselors are planning programs.

The results from the Carr and Schmidt survey (1994), Basile (1998) and Pros (1999) surveys, indicate the need for counseling programs designed to address the issues of academic success and career development, parents health, and parents death at the middle school level. Accurately identifying the needs of students is fundamental when planning, developing, and implementing an effective, well balanced school counseling program. However, it is important to note that the items that received a high ranking may not be the only topics covered in a proactive eighth grade guidance program. Obviously, some students need help in areas that are not of universal concern. A further research avenue to pursue might be to survey practicing middle school counselors to see what they perceive are the needs of eighth grade students. This would help validate whether there is a real "gap" between actual and perceived needs of eighth grade students.

Conclusion

All of these findings are the serendipitous result of attempting to prove to a group of counselor education students that the mean and standard deviation of data and a needs assessment can provide valuable information to counselors. It is important to note here that the school counselor in the local middle school took the results very seriously. Over the last several years, he has made numerous changes to the counseling program at the middle school based on the results of the survey. The school now has an emphasis on study skills through classroom guidance, on stress management and test

taking through small group activities, and follow up work with increased focus on death and dying issues. The counselor states "We are doing a better job than we were. We are constantly improving … We took the results very seriously … We now have more counselors available." (Personal communication, June 5, 2000) Serendipity again, as it was certainly not our intent to change the local school counseling program when the research was undertaken.

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Serendipity, Eighth Grade Concerns, and Needs Assessment

Abstract

Reports serendipitous results using a needs assessment survey (Carr and Schmidt, 1994). Demonstrates a gap between adult perceptions of student concerns and actual reported concerns.

TABLE 1
Top 20 Concerns of Eighth Graders

	Total Group – NC			Total Group – Oneonta			Total Group – Counselor Trainee		
	Rank	Mean	STD	Rank	Mean	STD	Rank	Mean	STD
Good grades	1	3.52	1.3	1	3.30	1.2	12	3.31	0.63
Parents health	2	3.31	1.3	3	2.91	1.32	27	2.54	0.88
Friend, relative, family member dying	3	3.04	1.3	2	3.03	1.32	30	2.31	0.75
Taking tests	4	2.93	1.25	4	2.77	1.3	8	3.69	0.48
Getting into college	5	2.93	1.25	5	2.72	1.26	36	2.15	0.69
Getting a good job...	6	2.85	1.32	6	2.68	1.19	28	2.54	0.98
Not being attractive...	7	2.82	1.25	9	2.45	1.15	1	4.46	0.66
Dying	8	2.77	1.36	8	2.51	1.3	40	1.77	0.73
Going to high school	9	2.73	1.4	10	2.38	1.3	9	3.54	0.66
Getting AIDS	10	2.65	1.33	17	2.14	1.11	32	2.31	0.85
Water and air pollution	11	2.63	1.61	23	1.83	0.95	34	2.23	0.83
Not having nice clothes	12	2.49	1.29	12	2.18	1.09	3	4.14	0.75
Speaking/reading in front of class	13	2.48	1.29	7	2.58	1.38	7	3.85	0.8
People talking about you	14	2.45	1.27	13	2.17	1.11	2	4.31	0.85
Not having boy/girl friend	15	2.4	1.32	18	2.12	1.23	6	4	1
Not living up to parents expectations	16	2.39	1.35	11	2.35	1.4	10	3.46	0.78
Being teased/laughed at by classmates	17	2.34	1.27	14	2.15	1.02	4	4.23	0.83
Being in a car accident	18	2.24	1.15	21	1.98	.99	26	2.54	0.78
Students stealing at school	19	2.23	1.27	32	1.60	.91	22	2.85	0.8
Storms, tornadoes, floods	20	2.21	1.20	28	1.68	1.05	35	2.15	0.69